

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis A

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS
COLLECTION

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SEP 16 1988

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (infectious hepatitis) is a contagious viral disease that causes swelling of the liver. It is spread through the intestinal tract and has an incubation period (time between exposure to the virus and onset of symptoms) of about one month.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

Symptoms of hepatitis A are age-related, with adults and adolescents more likely to develop the "classic" symptoms of fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea and jaundice (dark brown urine and yellow skin and whites of eyes). In children, hepatitis A infections usually have minimal flu-like or upset stomach symptoms or no symptoms at all, and children usually do not develop jaundice. When symptoms do occur they generally last one to two weeks, although on rare occasions adults can feel sick for as long as several months.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis A virus is found primarily in the stool and is commonly transmitted when contaminated hands, food or water reach the mouth and the virus is swallowed (called "fecal-oral" transmission). The peak period of viral shedding in the stool and, therefore, the period of highest risk of spread to others, is the two-week period before symptoms begin. Viral shedding usually stops one week after symptoms appear.

This virus, unlike certain other types of hepatitis viruses, is found only briefly in the blood. Saliva may have minimal amounts of the virus, and urine has none.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can. Individuals who have household or sexual contact with people who have hepatitis A are at high risk. The disease is more commonly diagnosed among older children and young adults because younger children are less likely to show any symptoms of infection. As a result, hepatitis A can spread unrecognized among young children, particularly in a day-care setting. By contrast, contact at elementary and secondary schools is usually not as important a means of transmission because the disease is more readily recognized and older children have learned better hygienic practices.

How is it diagnosed?

Hepatitis A is diagnosed by blood tests that look for a specific antibody against the virus. Blood tests can differentiate between a current infection and a past one. Tests for abnormal liver functioning provide a basis for suspecting infection, but these tests measure the amount of liver damage rather than the specific cause.

How is hepatitis A treated?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. However, rare complications such as extreme drowsiness, fluid retention, or blood abnormalities can be treated. Enforced bed rest, while once a popular treatment, is generally not required or recommended under ordinary circumstances.

How is hepatitis A prevented?

The most important way to prevent hepatitis A is to use good personal hygiene, particularly careful handwashing and sanitary disposal of feces. In addition, persons who have been exposed to hepatitis A should be immunized with immune serum globulin (ISG). ISG works even when given as late as two weeks after a person has been exposed because the disease usually takes four weeks to appear.

What is immune serum globulin (ISG)?

ISG is a solution of antibodies (disease-fighting substances) naturally manufactured by the human body. It is made by pooling antibodies collected from the blood of numerous donors. ISG contains antibodies that protect specifically against hepatitis A. Therefore, a person who receives an injection of ISG is "borrowing" temporary protection. This protection lasts at least three months, which is more than long enough to prevent hepatitis A in an exposed person.

Is there any risk of getting AIDS from ISG?

No. Blood from each donor is now prescreened for antibodies against the AIDS virus. Blood from persons who test positive for the antibodies, and are therefore presumed to be infected, is not used. In addition, the manufacturing process used to produce ISG is known to inactivate the AIDS virus.

Where can I get more information about hepatitis A?

Your personal physician

Your local board of health

In the phone book under local government

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Divisions of Communicable Disease Control (617) 522-3700

Office of Public Information and Health Education (617) 727-0049

October 1987